
Agenda Item:	Past Present and Future Working Party Report
Meeting Date:	Wednesday, 15 July 2026
Contact Officer:	Communications & Community Engagement Officer

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the progress of planning for the Town Council's participation in Heritage Open Days (HOD) 2026 and to seek agreement on the proposed event format and timings.

Current Situation

The Town Council hadn't initially planned to participate in Heritage Open Days (HOD) 2026. However, the national theme for this year is particularly relevant to Witney's heritage and provides an excellent opportunity for local heritage organisations to showcase aspects of the town's social history.

Officers invited local heritage organisations to work in partnership on Heritage Open Days 2026, including Witney and District Museum, Cogges Farm Museum and Witney Blanket Hall. To date, Witney and District Museum is the only organisation to have responded positively, and officers have since met with museum volunteers to develop plans for the opening weekend.

An outline of the proposed event was presented verbally to the Stronger Communities Committee and has subsequently been registered with the national Heritage Open Days programme. Registration enables the Council to access Heritage Open Days promotional resources and branding to support the event.

The event listing, entitled **Lives in Stone – Witney's Everyday Histories**, is available to view on the Heritage Open Days website and is attached as Appendix A.

<https://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/submission-event/lives-in-stone-witney-s-everyday-histories.html>

Heritage Open Day Format and Timings

The Witney and District Museum is collaborating with the Methodist Church on an exhibition entitled Blankets, Witney & Methodism, which will run throughout the two-week Heritage Open Days programme. Additional activities include a children's craft workshop on Saturday 12 September, a guided tour of the Bishop's Palace on Sunday 13 September focusing on the occupations of members of the Bishop's household, and a family genealogy day on Saturday 19 September.

To complement these activities, it is proposed that the Town Council revisits a successful feature from a previous Heritage Open Days event at Tower Hill Cemetery, which explored burial records and the changing occupations of those interred over successive decades. This proved to be a popular and informative activity, offering visitors an insight into the social and economic development of Witney.

The proposed event would highlight selected graves with information about the occupations of those buried there, illustrating how employment patterns within the town have evolved over time. Historic trade and business directories from the Council's collection would also be displayed to provide additional historical context.

The cemetery chapel would remain open throughout the event, allowing visitors to explore the building, which continues to attract considerable public interest. Refreshments would also be available.

It is proposed that the event is held over one and a half days, from 3pm to 8pm on Friday 11 September and 9am to 1pm on Saturday 12 September. This timetable aims to maximise accessibility by enabling school visits on the Friday afternoon while also providing an opportunity for residents who work during the week to attend on Friday evening or Saturday morning.

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the impact of its decisions on equality, biodiversity, crime and disorder, and the environment.

a) Equality

The proposed event is intended to be free and open to all members of the community. The extended opening hours over two days are designed to improve accessibility for a wide range of visitors, including school groups, working residents and families.

b) Biodiversity

The event will make use of existing cemetery paths, buildings and infrastructure and is not expected to have any adverse impact on biodiversity. Visitors will be encouraged to respect the cemetery's natural environment.

c) Crime and Disorder

The event is expected to have a positive impact by encouraging community engagement and increasing responsible use of the cemetery. Appropriate stewarding and risk assessments will be undertaken to ensure the event is delivered safely.

d) Environment and Climate Emergency

The event will make use of existing facilities and resources wherever possible. Printed material will be kept to a minimum, with digital promotion utilised where appropriate, supporting the Council's commitment to reducing its environmental impact.

Risk

The principal risks associated with the event relate to weather conditions, volunteer availability and visitor management.

As much of the event will take place outdoors, adverse weather may reduce attendance or affect the visitor experience. Appropriate contingency arrangements will be considered where practicable. Suitable risk assessments will be completed for public access to the cemetery and chapel.

Social Value

The proposed event will strengthen partnerships between local heritage organisations while increasing public awareness of Witney's social history. It provides opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with the town's heritage, encourages volunteering and community participation, and promotes Tower Hill Cemetery as an important heritage asset.

Financial

The event does not have a budget but will be low cost and use existing Witney Town Council resources and assets. Expenditure will relate primarily to promotional materials and refreshments (£200 remaining underspend from St George's Day was agreed at the previous PP&F working party meeting to be used to cover refreshments and printing) with officer time being taken as lieu time.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

1. Note the progress made in planning the Town Council's Heritage Open Days event.
2. Approve the proposed event format and timings.